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SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/AGS, INR/EU, AND EUR/PPD FOR LISBETH KEEFE

OSD FOR COMMANDER CHAFFEE

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SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS: MARCH 15, 2005

Parties Preparing for Early Elections

1. reads the front-page headline in mass-circulation provincial daily "Kleine Zeitung." After Sunday's district council elections in Styria, the SPOe is allegedly speculating that the OeVP-FPOe coalition government will fall apart, the daily says. For SPOe floor leader Josef Cap, whose party all but caught up with the OeVP in Styria, the election result is a sign that "Styrians want solid social-democratic reform and administrative work." He expects that the tensions between the FPOe and its coalition partner OeVP are going to increase in the future. Therefore, the Social Democrats are to discuss possible early elections at their party meeting. Meanwhile, the OeVP continues to rely on Chancellor Wolfgang Schuessel's lead over SPOe leader Alfred Gusenbauer when it comes to voters' confidence in the party's top candidates, the "Kleine Zeitung" says.

Haider without a Following

2. Carinthian Governor Joerg Haider's announcement that he is considering a return to the FPOe leadership is not getting any noteworthy support, says mass-circulation daily "Kurier." To the contrary, the daily continues, it has provoked a rather unusual reaction within the Freedom Party: No-one from the FPOe has actually stated approval of the suggestion. This must be "highly embarrassing" for Haider, FPOe ombudsman Ewald Stadler told the "Kurier." He explained why the majority in the FPOe is not backing the idea, stressing that it was the "umpteenth time" Haider had announced his alleged return. "Who is going to take that seriously?"

Vice-Chancellor Gorbach in the US

3. Mass-circulation daily "Kurier" reports that Austrian Vice-Chancellor Hubert Gorbach, currently on a visit to the United States, arrived in California on Monday, where he met Austrian-born California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. Gorbach is to discuss cooperation opportunities in nano and security technology, as well as alternative power sources with Californian partners. In his meeting with Schwarzenegger, the Vice-Chancellor touched upon a possible Austro-Californian partnership on fuel cell production. The "Kurier" notes that the Vienna Boys Choir also performed at the meeting.

EU Wants Access to all Communication Data

4. says the front-page headline in centrist daily "Die Presse." The EU plans to keep on file telephone numbers, e-mail and SMS addresses and Internet protocols for three years, the daily explains. Brussels' plan envisages the obligatory filing of the data in question as part of the EU's efforts to more effectively fight terrorist activities and crimes such as child pornography. In Austria, reception to the proposal varies. While Justice Minister Karin Miklautsch has explicitly welcomed the idea, Interior Minister Liese Prokop is opposed to a speedy implementation, stressing that it was "not going to happen this year," the "Presse" says.

Israel's New Ambassador on Israeli-Austrian Relations,
Mideast Peace Process

5. He is "cautiously optimistic" regarding the Mideast peace

process, Israel's new Ambassador to Austria Dan Ashbel told Austrian President Heinz Fischer, when he presented his credentials on Monday, says liberal daily "Der Standard." In an interview with mass-circulation daily "Kurier" of March 12, Ashbel, whose parents lived in Germany, before they had to flee the Nazis, stressed that he wants to "optimize relations between our two states." Israeli-Austrian relations "have improved very much. The way has been paved, so that we can start working now." The Ambassador underscored that the two countries could "profit from each other." On the Middle East, Ashbel explained that both Israel and the Palestinians, "have become aware that we could achieve more by peaceful coexistence -- cooperation may come later." The "Kurier" also quotes Ashbel as saying he "cautiously optimistic," despite "many setbacks" and "disappointment" because "we wanted to arrive at results too quickly." Israel, he underscored, "would like to hand over responsibility for the cities in the West Bank to the Palestinians. But at the same time we would like to make sure that there is no terrorism," because otherwise "this government will not have a chance."

Anthrax Alarm at Pentagon

16. ORF online news reports on an anthrax alarm sounded at the Pentagon mail facility yesterday. The Pentagon confirmed reports floated in US media that automatic sensors in its mail facility had detected the bacteria. The building was evacuated immediately, ORF online says. Follow-up tests for anthrax came back negative, but the incident is being investigated nonetheless, according to ORF online. All mail coming into the Pentagon is routinely X-rayed and irradiated to kill bacteria such as anthrax before it comes into the building. Despite such treatment, an alarm could still activate if the substance in question had been present in the mail before irradiation.

Croatia's EU Talks in Jeopardy

17. The opening of talks on Croatia's entry into the European Union scheduled for Thursday is in jeopardy. The EU Commission is insisting that Zagreb make greater efforts to hand over former General Ante Gotovina, who has been indicted by the UN War Crimes Tribunal. Austrian radio early morning news "Morgenjournal" says that Premier Jean-Claude Juncker of Luxembourg, which currently holds the rotating EU Presidency, has virtually issued Croatia an ultimatum: Unless Gotovina is handed over to the Hague Tribunal, the opening of entry talks will be postponed indefinitely. Although some countries, including Austria, would accept Croatia's efforts regarding Gotovina, and accept Zagreb's assertions that the former General's whereabouts are unknown, other EU members, such as Germany, Britain and Italy, hold that Gotovina has to be handed over prior to the beginning of talks.

Media Commentaries on Croatia

18. In centrist daily "Die Presse," former Secretary General of the Austrian Foreign Ministry Albert Rohan writes that there is "no doubt that Ante Gotovina belongs to The Hague - the only place where his guilt or innocence can be ascertained." Chief prosecutor Carla Del Ponte, who insists that the Croatian government could catch Gotovina, "should present proof of this to the EU," Rohan argues. Also, "Croatia's offer to let EU representatives participate in the search for Gotovina to convince them of Zagreb's goodwill should be accepted." It would not be right, Rohan believes, to "delay Croatia's acceptance as an EU member because of the unexplained whereabouts of a dubious figure such as Ante Gotovina." According to editor for centrist daily "Die Presse" Wolfgang Boehm, although it is necessary to "exert pressure on Croatia to step up its efforts to find Gotovina," the question is "whether holding an entire country hostage is not counterproductive for its rapprochement with the EU. For Croatia this massive pressure only has the effect of producing a new inner rift and a precarious crisis for the democratically oriented Sanader government. The EU's manner of proceeding completely ignores the fact that Croatia has long since earned its ticket to the EU through difficult democratic and economic reforms." For "justice's sake," Boehm urges, "Croatia should get the same treatment as Turkey: The start of membership negotiations with conditions attached."

Blast Targets Kosovo's President

19. An explosion has hit the car of Kosovo President Ibrahim

Rugova as he was traveling in a convoy in the province's capital, Pristina. According to police reports, Rugova was not hurt by the blast that occurred earlier this morning when he was heading to talks with EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana, writes ORF online news. Meanwhile, Austria's army is to deploy 40 more troops to Kosovo to support KFOR, Austrian Maj. Gen. Christian Segur-Cabanac confirmed. The move comes in view of the security situation in the area following the indictment at The Hague Tribunal of Kosovo Premier Ramush Haradinaj.

Brown